

From "The Press and Foreign Policy" by Bernard C. Cohen, Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PRESS

the Department is concerned, although they do little to alter the reporters' image of the handout as propaganda.

The second level of voluntary contribution to foreign affairs coverage includes the more serious efforts to keep correspondents informed on major or continuing aspects of American foreign relations. These are invariably *ad hoc* efforts through informal channels, and their general purposes may be summarized as letting the leading correspondents and analysts—particularly those who are read by other correspondents—know what is going on in crucial areas, and what the state of Departmental thinking is in these problem areas, so that newspaper comment will not get divorced from reality as the officials see it. One "danger" in such a divorce, as we shall see in Chapter VII, is that the policy makers may subsequently be forced to adapt themselves to the correspondents' view of reality. Stated this way, the instrumental component in these informational efforts is obvious; it is equally apparent in many of the voluntary contacts between correspondents and informed working-level officials, where the very act of informing the reporter in a particular context inescapably involves communicating a particular ordering and interpretation of a set of facts. But these instrumental elements should not obscure our understanding that this is the context in which the press is unobtrusively kept informed—not for attribution and sometimes not even for publication—of the developments that are currently sensitive and therefore not likely to be the subject of official releases or statements.¹

The third type of voluntary contribution consists of the deliberate instrumental use of the press in order to achieve specific foreign policy objectives. The identification of these occasions, in which information on particular issues is fed

¹ See Chapter V, footnote 11: "On some big matters the State Department informs him [Reston] almost automatically, as it would the representative of a major power." (Joseph Kraft, in *Esquire*, November 1958, p. 123.) For this process at work in the developing stages of the Marshall Plan, see Joseph M. Jones, *The Fifteen Weeks*, p. 237.

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and nature of the other things that are "in the news" that day.

It should be clear from these remarks that the formal lines of news distribution in the State Department and in other agencies having foreign policy responsibilities are adequate and satisfactory only for the more formal or routine types of messages about foreign affairs, and for the declaratory aspects of foreign policy—that is, when the announcement of an official position is itself an important or even an essential part of the policy. Since there are many of these items in contemporary foreign policy, these lines are busy most of the time. They are much less efficacious for the not-for-attribution material relating to on-going foreign relations or the non-declaratory phases of policy; and so they are not the channels that are used by officials in offering, or by correspondents in eliciting, these kinds of information. And while the correspondents have to cover the former class of material in the performance of their neutral role as objective recorders of daily history, they are usually more interested in the latter class and so they work hard at the cultivation of the necessary informal channels.

These informal connections range from the structured background briefings that Department officials will manage on particular occasions, to the casual private conversations on a personal level between a correspondent and an official. The former are sometimes hard to distinguish from press conferences.

This holds not only for reporters' reactions to speeches but in general for all information volunteered by officials through these formal channels. For example, in the confusion of developments in the Congo in the summer of 1960, the public affairs people in the State Department thought it was important to balance the Soviets' picture of their contribution to the United Nations' troop lift to the Congo by telling the American people about the United States' contribution to the troop lift. The Department issued a handout, and accompanied it with a press release, giving the statistics on the American effort; there was even an official on hand to answer any questions about what the Soviets had done. The officials were disappointed, but not greatly surprised, that very little of this was carried in the press as an independent story. One of them said, "To the press this was an old story. . . . [The correspondents] blame it on the city room: 'Don't blame me, it's not news.'"

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ences, the latter from ordinary discourse between individuals. The distinctive feature of a "backgrounder" is that the material given the reporter cannot be quoted or attributed to particular officials, or identified as the official viewpoint of the Department, nor is it considered binding. The purpose, most generally, is to enlighten and instruct the reporters, to let them share the thinking and perspectives of the policy officials, "so that they know what they should know about important policy matters"; "so they will act responsibly"; "so they will not go off halfcocked." Another important purpose is to get politically useful information into circulation without revealing the source. Some officials insist that only the Office of News gives out news, and that in their own background discussions with reporters they provide only a context or perspective; but apart from the non-attributability of the latter the distinction may be meaningless to a reporter. Context or perspective lends meaning to events, and may be "newsworthy" in itself. In fact, the distribution of the foreign affairs correspondent's time as between the News Office and his own contacts throughout the Department shows that the distinction between news and perspective is a distinction without a difference.

Informal sessions with reporters can be varied to meet almost any kind of circumstance. Assistant Secretaries of State have regularly held background briefings of a relatively well-structured sort. Secretary Dulles would often have a dinner discussion with a small group of correspondents, senior in status, who stood by, as it were, ever ready for a hint from on high that the Secretary would welcome a dinner invitation. Some of Dulles' critics suggest that the hints came whenever the Secretary was getting especially rough treatment in the press. The practice itself, however, is a common one, and many friends of Secretary Acheson attribute his difficulties with the press to his refusal to "play favorites" among the foreign affairs correspondents in this fashion. The luncheon conversation with a reporter is another very common practice

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among policy officials, but it is only one variety of what an official called "backgrounding *à deux*"; other forms are curricular, in the sense that they are a sanctioned use of the working time of those officials who have the inclination and competence to deal directly with the reporters. And, of course, there are extensive personal friendships between correspondents and officials, of a kind that facilitates the interchange of information not otherwise shared between the two institutions. There are thus multiple opportunities for officials to "plant a story" in private, and as a result there is a steady flow of information pertaining to current developments in foreign relations—called "leaks" by people who have not given it out themselves—from all sides of the Department.

● Criteria Governing the Distribution of News

The foreign policy official who has some reason for talking to reporters has no trouble finding a way. There are, to be sure, some fine points that he may want to consider in making his choice of the most appropriate channels—whether to make a public speech, for example, or to make a statement at the start of a press conference; whether to pass the word along to a small number of leading columnists, or to talk to a particular one; or whether to prepare a handout, etc.—but these are not separable from the specific issues of substance that he wants to discuss and the reasons that lie behind them, since his choice will be shaped in some measure by his estimate of the effects of handling particular policy ideas in particular ways. Questions of purpose, therefore, are relevant in any consideration of approaches to the press. What kinds of regularities can we discover in the reasons for the distribution of foreign policy information? What are some of the criteria governing the channeling of foreign affairs news to the press?

Ideological Considerations. The point was made in the preceding chapter that ideological or philosophical reasons for being favorably disposed toward the press are weak, and

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